



Paul & Alice Takemoto



Alice and Paul Takemoto after a screening of *Relocation, Arkansas* at the Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival

“Very few, if any, didn’t get out of it without some level of trauma. Even if you weren’t in a camp, even if you weren’t in a war, you’re part of that generation, you’re part of that basic human need to fit in, and you’re not fitting in.”

If you ever have the pleasure of meeting Alice and Paul Takemoto, you will be in the presence of an endearing mother and son relationship. Sitting

with them felt like reuniting with old friends, full of unexplainable but palpable comfort. Alice has a voice so sweet, she could deliver bad news and you'd receive it warmly. And when Paul cracks a joke, which is frequently, Alice's laugh is infectious.

As star subjects in the film *Relocation, Arkansas* by Vivienne Schiffer, their family history comes to light in the backdrop of the camps at Jerome and Rohwer, paralleled with the story of the South's bumpy road to desegregation. Now 91 years old and the youngest of four girls, Alice was a teenager when the war broke out, uprooted from her family's stable and comfortable life in Los Angeles. Her husband and Paul's father, Kaname Takemoto, experienced a starkly different WWII as a combat medic in the 442nd, which did not come without its consequences. "In retrospect, he clearly had undiagnosed, untreated post-traumatic stress disorder," says Paul. "They were just all screwed up." But despite a tumultuous experience, the Takemotos have thrived. To say they are an accomplished family puts it mildly: Alice is a classical pianist who still plays chamber music, and Paul has been a spokesperson for the Federal Aviation Administration for over twenty years. He also wrote a book about his parents called *Nisei Memories: My Parents Talk about the War Years*.

Alice began our interview by telling me that both of her parents, Zenichi and Yoshiko Imamoto, were imprisoned a few months after Pearl Harbor on account of them being Japanese language teachers in a tiny Southern California town.

Where was your family living before the war?

Alice Takemoto: Norwalk, California, which is right near Disneyland. It's in L.A. county but at that time it was kind of a crossroads where you rolled up the window because there were all these dairy farms. But there was a Japanese school, quite a large one. My father was the principal.

Paul Takemoto: It's still there.

AT: It's still a very thriving cultural community with not only Japanese but other Caucasians. They've got judo–

PT: Kendo classes, basketball, and yeah, it's amazing.

That's amazing. That must bring you comfort that something your parents were part of is still there.

AT: Well it's the strangest thing because that the community center is thriving, but they have no record of my father or mother being the teacher there.

Do you think that had something to do with the FBI records? Or that it was just so far back?



Ruth McInroy, Paul, and Alice visiting Jerome. Photo courtesy of Vivienne Schiffer

AT: I don't know. My father was there, let's see. I was in the seventh grade and we left when I was a junior in high school. He was there enough years.

Were you the eldest in the family?

AT: I'm the youngest of four girls.

So they were teaching, and Pearl Harbor happened. Were they picked up immediately?

AT: Actually you know, all the schoolteachers were picked up on the same day, which was March the 13th. And Buddhist priests and ministers. First group were all the business people. And that was really on Pearl Harbor day.

When they were taken, what happened to you and your sisters?

AT: Well my oldest sister was going to UC Berkeley. And my next sister was going to nursing school either in Oakland or I don't know where, but they were close. And my next sister was 18 and she was going to community college, and I was 15 in high school. So, when Mother and Father were taken, it was just the two of us minors left alone. And they wanted to send a police matron and we said we didn't want any strangers. Have you heard of Terminal Island?

Yes.

AT: Well those people were fishermen and within 24 or 48 hours they had to leave the island so the different churches had them go different places. And we had about 65 of them living in our school-house. We didn't know them but they were right next door, so my sister and I said we didn't feel that alone. But they didn't know us and they didn't know that my parents were gone – there was no connection.

Paul: Were they families?

AT: They were families. And they went to our high school for that duration. They came – I can't recall when they came, might have been February. I think they walked with me to the bus stop. I blocked all that out or just don't know. But my sisters had to come home when the curfew was instated. So Mary and I were alone for two weeks and then they came back. And then two weeks later, we were in Santa Anita. So we were one of the early ones to go. We were April 13, just a month after Mother and Father were taken.

AT: So there were five big mess halls, like 5,000 people ate at each one of them. We were the first ones out, our family number was 2138, so that's pretty low. And the mess hall didn't know how to cook. The evacuees had to do all the work. It was really a mess.

Did you know where your parents were? Could you communicate with them?

AT: Well certainly, the officials don't let you know. So by word of mouth, I

don't know who told us but my father was in, they call it Tuna Canyon, we called it Tujunga near Hollywood Hills. And there, we could talk through a fence, nobody was listening to us. But with my mother, that was a federal prison. So there's somebody listening, right in the room with you. And all you could do is just cry. That was really hard, and she had a miserable time.

PT: Wasn't she in the L.A county jail first?

AT: They were put in the county jail. Mother and Father never talked to us about it for the longest time until I had to probe. See, Father had gone to another city to take care of a family where they had dual



A still from *Relocation, Arkansas*

citizenship, so he was out of town. So when the FBI came, they took Mother, and then Father came home and they took him but neither of them knew the other one was arrested.

AT: So they all went through the county jail system and Mother was in a cell with two other people. I know she told me they took her belt, anything like that, and they were put in a cell. I'm not sure how long they were held there. But any criminal would go through that same kind of stuff. Then she was sent to Terminal Island for two or three months, then they have a hearing and they have witnesses. There was a Caucasian Quaker minister – Nicholson – who spoke Japanese. So he was asked to be a translator at Mother's hearing as well as another Issei lady. And so she passed her hearing, and then after three months she came to join us in Santa Anita.

Father, his hearing, I don't know whether he had any Japanese witnesses or not but we have this paper where there were three people who were on the board and they voted to let him go free. But the Attorney General Biddle nixed it, so Father was sent to where he was a prisoner of war. And

then the other thing that I'll never forget, is that I just wanted to know why they were arrested because Father was not an activist in any way. He certainly did not – I didn't get any propaganda at that time. Anyway, later on I asked my ex son-in-law who was a lawyer to write a letter to the FBI with the Freedom of Information Act. And I got about ten pages blacked out and at the end it says, 'There is no indication that your parents were ever arrested.' And you know, that's really cruel.

So they just tried to erase the record?

AT: Oh it was all blacked out, whatever they printed out. But at the end the type was saying there was no evidence. I don't know how they did that.

So then your mother came to Santa Anita, and you and your sisters were there as well. So their education at CAL and nursing school was all interrupted?

AT: Right. My sister said people who had midterms did graduate. She was a senior but she didn't get her diploma. So she put her education on hold and she went with me to Oberlin, three semesters because I was only 16, coming directly from camp. So she went and she worked in this graduate house where they had dinners for faculty, and she was the assistant cook. But that's what she did for me.

PT: She's great, my Auntie Grace.

And she's still alive?

PT: They're all alive. They're all in their nineties. They're all still with it, too. Her mom lived until 105. And feisty the whole way.

AT: I have to tell you about it. See I'm 91, Mary turned 94, Lily's going to be 97, and Grace is going to be 98 in January. And nobody has depression, nobody has dementia. Just forgetfulness.

In what way? Because I love that you just said none of you had depression. You have such a good spirit.

AT: I think it comes from my mother. Paul's son just went to Japan and wanted to find relatives and he went to the house that my mother was born in, and it's a big house. And she came to this country, married my father who was a schoolteacher and every house was a very modest house. I thought they were nice homes. But they were all smaller houses. And then I think about Mother going to prison, and then working as a domestic. She never, ever, ever talked about her past life that was rather luxurious. Never talked about that.

PT: She was amazing. Strongest person I ever knew. No pity, no bitterness. All forward.

AT: And kind of frank, too. I have to tell you this story. At her 105th birthday we went to her nursing home. And the family was decorating. And she and I were sitting out in the garden and I was wearing a jumper and I said, 'Mom, these threads I dyed, I threaded the loom and I wove this fabric and then I cut this jumper and sewed it. She said, 'It's a little big under the arm hole.' *[laughs]* She was a pistol, you know?

PT: I was in college, and she told my mom that it was okay if my older sister married someone who wasn't Japanese but she wanted me to marry someone who was Japanese. This is in Kensington, Maryland. So I wrote her back and said, 'Grandma, there are two Japanese girls I wouldn't mind going out with but the one doesn't know I'm alive and the other doesn't want anything to do with me. We're going to have to expand the pool if you want me to get married.' She wrote me back a cute letter, she laughed and she sent me \$20 to buy new jeans because she didn't like my jeans. She was a pisser.

AT: She was a schoolteacher, so she did not have buddies amongst the parents. She did not allow that. And that's smart, too.

So that she wouldn't play favorites with the kids?

AT: No, I think there could be petty gossip in this Japanese small community. But I do remember I learned how to drive when I was ten because in the schoolyard I couldn't hit anything. I remember driving my

mother at nighttime to see this one friend and I would sit there with the daughter. And Mother would listen to the mother, and the other mother's crying. But that's the only family she would go to visit. And later on I find out that this family was another class, there was inter-marrying there. I think there was abuse to the woman by the husband to this woman's daughter. You know the word *kobosu*, meaning to cry, to shed tears? So Mother was a listener. I heard from my sisters, like, thirty years later. But she did that.

She was very strong and could give that comfort.

PT: She was my hero.

AT: In our community of Japanese, there were these class structures from Japan. And I didn't know anything about it, my sisters knew nothing about this because my parents wouldn't discuss it. Other people would tell my sisters and then later on I would hear 'this person married this person,' and they were never talked to after that. So all of this gossip I'm hearing when I'm 60 years old when everybody's already gone, but that kind of thing goes on in any kind of community. My mother and father never ever told us anything like that.



So you got a sense of what they went through because of your sisters or did you ever ask your mother and father about it?

AT: Well, the first time I went to the archives, I went with Min Yasui's sister. She said, 'Ask your mother, get the information.' So I called her on the phone the next day, and Mother said, 'Why are you asking these things? It's ancient history.' So she didn't want to talk about it. And when I'd go to visit her, she'd always talked about this other lady who was this minister's wife who was arrested too, with Mother. Mother

was released after her hearing, but this other lady Mrs. Wada, went to federal prison for two more years.

It was such overkill.

Did you know that these ships with Japanese sailors would come into San Pedro And as soon as you step on the boat, there's a little thing with water where you have to disinfect your hands. So who knows? *[laughs]* I don't know anymore than that, whether Mother's uncle was on that ship. I have no idea.

PT: Wait, so Grandma's uncle was an admiral in the Japanese navy?

AT: Yes. Grace told me that.

After a side about trying to get the details of the admiral, Alice transitions to talking about her grandfather in Japan.

AT: Miyaji is a little village, it still is a little village. He was the mayor of the village but something had happened concerning money and it wasn't my grandfather's fault but he attempted the sword *[Alice motions seppuku]* and failed. This is what my oldest sister says, that she remembers my mother crying.

PT: Well then he jumped in front of a train.

AT: Then he succeeded. He threw himself in front of a train. She never saw her parents once she left there. She went back after my father died at age 81, and at that time it was the 25th year since her mother died and the 50th year since her father died. And the temple was right next door where they had the services, she said she just cried all day. But when you think she never told—I never knew anything about this—I never knew. I heard it from my sister.

Did your mother tell your sister?

AT: She said Mother cried.

PT: Auntie Grace remembers Grandma crying?

AT: Yeah, she does, she does. So if Mother was 80, it would be fifty years, so she must've been 30 years old when her father died. She went through a lot but she was always very thankful for what she had, which to me is amazing. I think about her a lot. I went to that house and I was just marveled that it was an old house but it had features like the *shoji* screen that you put your finger in and it was cloissoné. At that time it was 150 years old.

Do you speak Japanese?

AT: Just like a second grader. So when I went there, we were there for three months and we went to about seven different universities and since Ken couldn't speak Japanese, so I spoke in my kitchen Japanese. You know, the immigration stopped at a certain point so the people didn't come from Japan, so my mother and father's speech is what they called the Meiji Era. So I learned the Japanese they spoke way back then and I'm using this language with the professors and they smile because it's so quaint.

PT: It would be like listening to someone speak English from a hundred years ago. Language is always evolving, it's like going back in time. They must've been fascinated by that.

AT: They were fascinated.

So the house that was in the film at the very end–

AT: That's where they [Alice's mother and father] worked as domestics. That's in Washington, D.C. It's right on Beach Drive, and it's quite a historic place, [Peirce Mill](#). It's on Rock Creek Park, and what they did is these barges would come up and they would get the rocks and they would grind flour there, it's still a working mill. Then the same stone house is where my mother and father used to live, and another stone house is where the horses used to be and that's now a gallery. Tilden Street is right in the middle there. Mother was the cook, and Father cleaned this house. It was a doctor and his family, and they knew Mother and Father's circumstances so they treated them very respectfully. Nine years they worked for them. And

every summer they went to Nantucket. And days off they would pack a lunch and go to the beach and they had a nice time. So there were good moments in their retirement.

And they had a happy marriage?

AT: I think so. My mother apparently just saved one letter that my father wrote. And she gave it to me on one of the last trips so I kept it and I didn't know what to do with it because I can't read it. But she was describing it to me, kind of embarrassed because you know, Asian men don't show their emotions to their wives.



Paul and his maternal grandfather, Zenichi Imamoto

PT: That was kind of broad statement though, Mom. *[laughs]* That encompassed a lot of people.

AT: She was trying to convey that father was showing his feelings and she

was a little embarrassed about that. So I asked one of my musician friends who was raised in Japan and she's only 70. She translated it and it was just very bland, nothing unusual. Then I sent it to this lady who taught at Mother and Father's Japanese school so she was already in her 90s, Mrs. Nakajima. And she called me and she said it was beautifully written, a beautiful love letter. Apparently it was written in the classic style.

Oh, so your friend from Japan didn't get the full effect or meaning.

AT: That's why I want to get it translated.

PT: Is that what you had me print out the other day?

AT: That's right.

PT: So this has been kind of eating at you, then.

AT: Yeah. Because I really want to know.

Did your friend, Mrs. Nakajima, allude to what it said?

AT: No because this was over the phone. So Father was a prisoner of war, and Mother was in a prison. I'm sure he didn't know what his future was. That's why I want to know what his feelings were because see, in that mug shot of Father [in the film], that was pretty horrible. He was 52, Mother was 44.

Wow, so he wasn't a young man when this happened. That's so hard.

AT: So you know, you wonder. My sister Grace said that he wanted all of us to go to Crystal City because then we'd be together. He didn't know how long the war would last. But Grace said no she didn't want to go, she wanted to go to college. So that ended that.

PT: Wait, when did he want you guys to go to Crystal City?

AT: Apparently when he was still in prison.

PT: And you were where?

AT: We were in camp too, must have been Jerome. Everything was so uncertain and then rumors flying, too. And the thing is that, when after Mother came back to camp from her trials, we were so wrapped up in day-to-day survival at the camp that I didn't ask her anything about camp. And when Father came back from the prison, he came back in February and I left in August, I didn't ask anything about what happened to him, either. Because I was all involved in my misery. So, it's just, all that is lost.

PT: Also, those kinds of conversations would be difficult to have under any kind of circumstances but if you throw in certain cultural things—

AT: Yeah. And you know there were people who had a great time in camp because they knew everyone. My sister was working in the hospital in Santa Anita and they asked for volunteers to go to Jerome. This is why we went to Jerome. We didn't know anybody else. So there I am, I was still 15 when I moved to Jerome. I didn't know anybody and there's no newspaper, no TV, no library, no nothing. So it was just very lonely. There was nothing about Arkansas that was positive. Nothing.

Paul, earlier you said that it affected all the siblings. What do you mean and what have you seen?

PT: Certain details like, Auntie Grace's generosity. So these are just my impressions. The way she just gives, I don't know, I couldn't express. But I've always felt, even when I was a little kid that it was a result of the camps. And with our relationship [to Alice] you and me, remember you used to give me such a hard time about the way I dressed. Admittedly, I used have hair down to here, I used to cut sleeves off of everything. Flannel shirts, t-shirts.

AT: Really?

PT: And don't you remember? We used to get into it! And you told me one time, 'Someone meeting you may have never met a Japanese person before, so it's all about an impression.' Which gave me all the more reason to not dress nicely.

AT: Oh, really. I got that from my mother.

PT: And I remember one time you played in a concert in a very fancy house in Maryland and Auntie Mary was there, this was a while ago. There were all these chairs arranged. But that whole night Auntie Mary wouldn't move. And she said something like, 'I've never been in a house this fancy.' She felt like she didn't deserve to be there. And I grew up thinking women were stronger than men in terms of the absence of anger and self-pity. Absence of bitterness. Whereas where we grew up in Maryland, there was this tight little group of Japanese American families. None of us had extended family, everyone had family back in California, so we became our own extended families. And a lot of the dynamics were the same. Like my father was in the 442nd, and Mr. Kobayashi was in the 442nd, and Mr. Ikari was in the 442nd. and all the wives were in camp. And the men were all these hard-ass, stubborn—

AT: Controlling.

PT: Controlling, short-tempered, held grudges. And the wives were the centers of these families. They were the glue and that's an awareness I had when I was a tiny little kid.

AT: Because we know so many of the wives that are such wonderful people.

PT: Like the best people in my life, they made the biggest impact. And they're all women. So I grew up thinking women are stronger than men.

PT: A quick thing about the resisters. This family Kobayashi, the Kobayashi parents, we would have Thanksgivings together, Christmas together, they were literally like second parents to me and I was closer to the parents than I was to my own aunts and uncles in California and Hawaii. The children are like, closer to siblings than cousins. We're still close to them, both of the parents are gone now.

PT: Mr. Kobayashi had been in the 442nd, Mrs. Kobayashi was in Heart Mountain. And then there was another family, Ikari. Mr. Ikari was in the 442nd, he got shot. Bullet went through one leg and out and into the other

leg.

So these guys went to see this movie, [Rabbit in the Moon](#), it was like year 2000. And my father who had his own issues – in retrospect, he clearly had undiagnosed, untreated post-traumatic stress disorder. So he volunteered from Hawaii and he was a combat medic, and my father's take on the resisters was that they were heroes. He told me that he thought it took more courage for them to do what they did than for what they did. He said, 'I was just going along with everybody. Everybody was going into the army so I went into the army.' Mr. Kobayashi and Mr. Ikari's position was the typical, hard-ass, ex-442nd/100th guy and that those guys were traitors. So the three of them got into this huge argument. And it basically was the fuel that killed these friendships. And we stopped having Thanksgivings together, and Christmases together and I remember my father telling me about this argument in the kitchen, and his hands are shaking, he was so mad. 'These guys are heroes and they're calling them cowards!' This is how many years after the war's over, it's like it just happened. These resentments and anger was just right underneath the surface and all it took was this movie to spark it. I didn't even know what a resistor was. I was like, what were the resisters?

AT: And he was in actual war for six months. Actual war. Dad was in full combat for six months and then he was in an army hospital for three months in Rome.

And he was deployed to which countries?

AT: Italy. You heard of the Triple V in Hawaii? These were college kids who volunteered, about 150 of them. And he was at the University of Hawaii when I think it was a Chinese Hawaiian man that came and said, 'You guys want to show your loyalty, volunteer as a group.' So that's how that Triple V started.

PT: You know what's funny, I was in junior high when I first heard the men in that



From right to left: Ruth McInroy, Alice Takemoto, Rosalie Santine Gould, Vivienne Schiffer and Paul Takemoto. Photo courtesy of Vivienne Schiffer

outfit being described as heroes. And that was such a jarringly inaccurate word to me because all I knew was Dad, and these rages and then the silences. And there was nothing heroic to me about that. And the other men, and how messed up

they were, they were just all screwed up. As you would be, these guys all pretty much grew up in poverty then they were in a war. How could that not screw you up?

PT: [*To Alice*] Just to me, your whole generation is a traumatized generation. The whole generation. Very few, if any, didn't get out of it without some level of trauma. Even if you weren't in a camp, even if you weren't in a war, you're part of that generation, you're part of that basic human need to fit in, and you're not fitting in. On a very basic intrinsic level. Your own government has determined that your entire kind needs to be locked up, needs to be put behind barbed wire. And that's what fills me with rage about the current situation.

A warm thank you to Vivienne Schiffer for helping to coordinate this interview.